

The Last Record Store

by Peter Stone Brown

Today I bought what probably will be my final purchase at Tower Records. I was riding my bike by their downtown Philly store and even though I knew the picking's would be slim the 70% percent off sign along with the five days to go sign were impossible to ignore. The second floor of the massive store was closed up and what was left didn't even fill the remaining browsers. If there was a classical CD in sight, I didn't see it.

The three month liquidation of Tower Records was a sad and pitiful wake in which I participated every few weeks. Only in the purchase today where I bought three CDs for less than 15 bucks was there really any kind of deal. The rest was a natural ritual combined with the knowledge I might not see certain albums again and now was the time to get them.

Records have been a large part of my life. There was a time if I passed a record store it was impossible not to go in which would drive whoever I was with crazy. Years later working as a courier where everyday I stood a chance of being sent anywhere within a 300 mile radius, I was always on the lookout for two things, record stores and diners. In a musty ancient store in Trenton that still kept it's stock in green sleeves in the back while the album covers displayed in the browses were empty, I came across the very first T-Bone Burnett album, recorded under the name of J. Henry Burnett.

I started hanging out in record stores in junior high school. There were two in my town in North Jersey and one was really an appliance store with a record section in the back. The guy who ran the record department would let me go back in the stock room and rummage through the promotional items. It was a good way to get posters for free and I came out of it with a Bob Dylan album cover of an album that never was released.

Years later I ended up working in a few. The first was Sam Goody's downtown Philadelphia store. Sam Goody was Tower's predecessor on the East Coast and even when they only had a few stores, they called themselves "The world's largest record retailer." Going to Sam Goody's was a magical experience. It was huge. Aisles and aisles of records. I remember going to Goody's West Side store with my brother. We were on our way to see Bob Dylan's Halloween concert and record buying was serious business. We laid about 20 records we wanted on top of the browsers and narrowed it down to two.

Working in a record store was never as much as fun as it should have been though Goody's was a great source of comedy. Goody's was a full catalogue store and they carried just about every label except Rounder Records (which was just starting out at the time I worked for Goody's) for some reason never explained. Working at Goody's for six months was equivalent to a year anywhere else if not more because you had to deal with every conceivable recording including sound effects albums, bird call albums and language instruction records, and Mummers albums. The Mummers are a Philadelphia institution who march up Broad Street every New Year's day playing "Oh Dem Golden Slippers" and dressed in costumes usually made of feathers they spend the entire year making. The Mummers were on the Sure label and Goody's carried the entire line, except Sure #35 which never came in no matter how many times it was ordered. Of course Sure #35 was the one record that somebody wanted and one salesperson made the mistake of telling a customer he could get it. Every Saturday this customer would come in looking for the record and every week he was told it was on order. This went on for close to a year and then he learned the salesman's name and on Saturday's all the guys in the record department worked with an eye on the front door so they could warn the salesman to go hide if this guy came in.

In those days Philly had several record stores and for whatever reason all the good ones were close to each other on the East side of downtown. Wednesdays was shopping night which meant a ten hour work day. No one had off on Wednesdays and no one had off on Saturday. The idea was to go on dinner break as late as possible so you could come back usually slightly drunk and have to do as little as possible. Most of the people who worked at the other record stores went to the same bar on Wednesday nights.

I was hired because I knew where to put Procol Harum albums. At the time I was hired, Goody's had just moved from their original location, bought out from under them by their main competitor who happened to be Sam Goody's former son-in-law. The result was a siege mentality, with Goody's going to the mattresses until in one rather amazing Michael Corleone-esque move they bought out the competitor more than doubling the amount of stores they owned in the process, which in some cases meant having two stores in the same mall.

That acquisition was the beginning of the end for Sam Goody. I was manager of the record department by then and they moved me to take care of one of the new mall stores. I walked out not long after. The only thing that made working there tolerable was being in the city. The way to deal with it was pretending you were working all week for

the big show on Saturday, and Saturday was a show, because every freak in the city would come in one long parade. Everybody had their own special customers they'd wait for and if they didn't like someone looking for someone or were in a conversation with someone we worked with or in the middle of a cigarette, the usual response was, "It's over there." The special customers were the ones you could talk serious music with and turn them onto the good stuff. One of my first customers was a kid into blues harmonica. I pointed him towards Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, II, Junior Wells and James Cotton. He got into it in a big way and every time he'd come in he'd tell me about obscure blues 45's he'd found. He went onto become a great blues harp player working with Muddy Waters veteran, Jimmy Rogers and (much later) Levon Helm. That kind of experience isn't going to happen buying from Amazon or downloading from iTunes.

Sometime in the early 1980s, the first East Coast Tower Records opened on Lower Broadway in New York City. By then Sam Goody's was in existence in name only. Anyone who knew about records considered it a joke. I happened to be in New York the second day they were open and the amount of stock they had in addition to the way the store was laid out was amazing. There were no miscellaneous sections, every artist had a browser card. Musical categories were kept together, you could go from folk music to bluegrass to country all in a row, and they had records I didn't even think were in print any more. And since it was their grand New York City opening, everything was on sale. I looked forward to going back, but somehow it was never as good as that first time.

A few years later they opened in Philly on South Street on the site of a failed music club. I knew a lot of people who went down for jobs, most with several years of experience. Tower didn't care how experience you were, the starting pay was the same no matter what experience you had, slightly above minimum wage. By then I was pretty much done with working in record stores having been alienated by working in Philly's number one independent store at the time which is a whole other story. Some people I know refused to work there because the pay was so bad, but a lot of others, usually musicians did. When they opened in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, virtually the staff of a smaller chain saw the writing on the wall and moved over to Tower immediately.

A couple of years after Tower's emergence in the Philadelphia area, the great conversion to CDs began and with that the price of buying music rose considerably. Tower may have been the biggest music retailer, but their prices sucked and their sales seemed non-existent or relegated to the stuff that was cheaper already. The myth of Tower

Records was their catalogue. On initial appearance it looked like they had everything, start digging slightly deeper and they didn't. How their inventory worked was a mystery and as time got on the way albums were categorized could be bizarre, and once an album received a computer code, that was it, it couldn't be changed. There were many times I'd see something I wanted or that looked interesting, but didn't have the money at the time to buy it. When I went back to get it, it was gone and just like Sure #35, it never returned. In 1991, Rhino Records reissued the entire Otis Redding catalogue on CD. These albums had been out of print for years and available only on Japanese imports. Not long after their release, I wanted to get some as a Christmas present for someone, so Tower seemed like the logical place to go. Not one was in site. Brand new major reissues, the kind of thing Tower was supposed to specialize in. After that it didn't matter that they were open till midnight. Convenient in case you needed some CDRs or tape fast, but not much more than that.

Tower has been on the verge of bankruptcy for years. I have several friends who'd worked there over the years and one who has stayed to the bitter end, which is this next week. He'd clue me in to each bankruptcy long before it was announced publicly. I knew inherently the end was near this summer when I went into their South Street store and they didn't ask to check my backpack. In a way, buying records, collecting records hasn't been the same since compact discs. The best thing about Compact Discs was the great reissues and box sets that emerged, but that's about it. I think trying to read the print on all those booklets ruined my vision and rare was the time I would sit and listen to an album holding the jewel case or CD book, the way I did an album cover. CDs also killed the idea of an album side. It ended all discussion of the first side's great, but the second side stinks. In fact kids coming up in the era of compact discs have no idea that the second side of *Bringing It All Back Home* was one of the greatest sides of any album ever released.

So once where I could name a dozen record stores in Philly without thinking about it, the number has greatly diminished. Borders may have the stock, but they don't know what to do with it. The Tower method was also smart in one respect, if there was a magazine with an artist on the cover, they made sure that magazine was displayed above the artist's suggestion and the same with books or videos. The was one of their best merchandising tricks.

It just is not the same looking at a list of albums at some online store and even though they may offer robotic suggestions based on what you're looking at, there's not gonna be that one knowledgeable person

to say those are the later Little Richard or George Jones recordings, you want the earlier ones.

But for those of us who like rummaging through music stores for the pure thrill of discovery and holding something in our hands before deciding whether or not to buy it, and considered both collecting and listening to music a shared experience, it's not dark yet, but it's getting there.